AARP INTERNATIONAL *THE JOURNAL*
VOLUME 11 — 2018 EDITION

AARP Real Possibilities

Caring, the Kotoen Way

By Lauren Hassani

https://doi.org/10.26419/int.00001.019

Caring, the Kotoen Way

A renowned center focuses on helping the oldest with the youngest.

https://doi.org/10.26419/int.00001.019

By Lauren Hassani
Photographs by Marco Javier

At 9:30 on a Thursday morning, the stillness of the large central hall at Kotoen is interrupted by the shrieks and giggles of dozens of children. They scamper barefoot into the wide open space, the older ones (4 or 5 years old) running and skipping, and the littlest ones tottering along on wobbly legs, straight into the outstretched arms of their surrogate grandmas and grandpas.

Children in Kotoen's Edogawa Nursery rush to greet the seniors.

PREVIOUS PAGE

Keiko Sugi, CEO, Kotoen, in the courtyard during morning games.

The group of seniors — about twenty men and women, mostly in their 70s and 80s — sit on folding chairs in a semi-circle. They look amused, some even delighted, by the wriggling mass of preschoolers before them; the more outgoing older folks dole out high fives and hugs and even welcome the kids to sit on their laps.

This is the scene each morning at Kotoen, a facility on the easternmost outskirts of Tokyo in Edogawa Ward, known for its innovative approach to improving senior care. It is a *yoro shisetsu*, or combined child care center and long-term care community, the first in Japan at the time of its inception in 1976. With two facilities under one roof, the 173 seniors who receive full or part-time care have the opportunity to interact daily with the 138 pre-primary school children enrolled in the program.

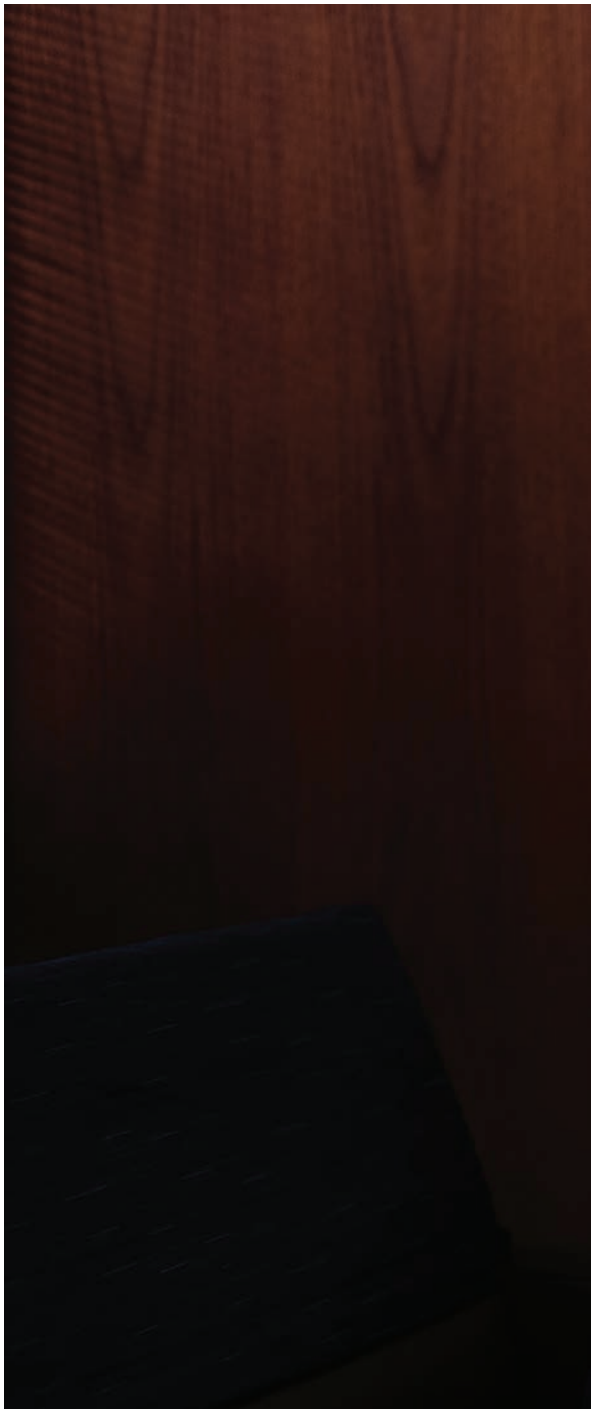
The Kotoen intergenerational model, a pioneering solution to the predicament of a rapidly aging society, has been replicated across Japan and the world. Kotoen's renown has only grown from publicity over the decades, including by AARP in past issues of *The Journal*. Even as the government and private sector increasingly turn to technology and automation to deal with Japan's aging challenges, there is still a pressing need for places like Kotoen that address the issues on a human level — creating a life of meaning and fulfillment for those who need it most. It's not surprising that Kotoen's effectiveness arises not only from knowledge, expertise, or progressive ideas, but also from the passion and commitment of those who run the organization.

Keiko Sugi, Kotoen's CEO, is a self-assured woman with closely-cropped, salt-and-pepper hair and a ready laugh. She is a vortex of energy, pairing running shoes with her flower print dress so that she can easily make the rounds throughout this and two other Kotoen facilities in Edogawa. Sugi has been instrumental in the evolution of the organization. She married into the business. Her husband's family started the original nursing home in 1962, and over the years, she has watched (and helped guide) Kotoen as it expanded from a home for seniors with no families, to a larger organization offering social welfare services for the elderly and disabled, along with child care. She and her husband and twin 42-year-old sons manage the operations.

The mission of Kotoen is to create an inclusive society, one in which people of all ages and abilities can find happiness

The chaos of the morning, as children and seniors greet each other and perform morning exercises.

The mission of Kotoen is to create an inclusive society, one in which people of all ages and abilities can find happiness together. That quest is obvious in the daily interactions, all designed to remove misconceptions between people and encourage communication.



together. That quest is obvious in the daily interactions, all designed to remove misconceptions between people and encourage communication. In the mornings, the children gather in the main hall for morning exercises with the seniors. They dance and stretch in unison, exchange greetings, and bow to each other before continuing with the day. Later, they play games indoors and out, tell stories, and join events that bring the generations together. For seniors, being around children broadens their world and makes them feel like part of society. For children, exposure to seniors with dementia and to people with disabilities teaches tolerance and respect — valuable life lessons. According to Sugi, these are especially important lessons in Japanese society, which she feels is particularly rife with discrimination against people with mental and physical disabilities.

An event early in Sugi's life planted the seed that would eventually grow into her lifelong desire to right social injustice. She recalls that anti-Korean sentiment, which began in the 1920s in Japan and continues to this day, was prevalent at her elementary school. One day, a Japanese classmate spit over the edge of the railing onto the forehead of a Korean classmate at the bottom of the stairs. Sugi, normally a reserved girl, marched upstairs and slapped the boy across the face. "I hated discrimination, deep inside of me, in my core. I always have had this mission to help the ones who have been picked on. That's where it got started."

Sugi is a born social worker. Though the job of CEO requires office work, she is more likely to be found walking through Kotoen, talking to staff and residents. On this particular morning, she's checking in on the day care and gathering toddlers

around her like a mother hen; in the afternoon, she's coordinating an Exercise Day event at the Care Center Tsubaki facility for seniors receiving day care services and disabled young people. She works tirelessly on Kotoen, her life's mission, almost to a fault — her sons are always telling her to take some time off. Just this past fall, Sugi was honored by Japan's Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications for her work, an acknowledgment of her dedication. She, and really the entire Sugi clan, are the driving force behind the facility. Her son Daiichi heads up the day care program, while other son Yuichi, who recently received his social work license, will one day take over the organization. Her husband, Euchi Sugi, shares directorial duties with her and is Chairman of the Board of Directors.

Like most long-term care facilities throughout Japan, Kotoen is short-staffed. A growing population of older people, coupled with a shrinking workforce and little immigration, have made caregivers and other workers scarce. This hardship is acutely felt at Kotoen, where the staff are such an integral part of the mission. They are trained in how to execute the intergen-

"I hated discrimination, deep inside of me, in my core. I always have had this mission to help the ones who have been picked on. That's where it got started."

erational system, no small feat given all of the moving parts that require attention. Sugi, for instance, requires that her staff work together to ensure the safety of everyone involved, plan and execute multigenerational activities and events, and understand the long-term needs of very different age groups. And they must do all of the above, which typically involves long hours and some physical labor, for modest wages. Money is often tight at organizations like Kotoen, social welfare corporations whose enrollees are heavily subsidized by the government. In addition to the challenging work, Sugi requires that her team be educated on softer skills, with an emphasis on empathy and anti-discrimination. Cultivating the staff has admittedly taken longer than she expected, but is critical to the success of the model. She insists that the Kotoen method is replicable in other sites and countries, as long as the employees share the same level of passion and commitment. After all, social work, especially with the complexity of an intergenerational environment, is not for the apathetic.

Sugi has found creative ways to solve the workforce shortage, such as employing seniors. Currently, 39 out of Kotoen's 250 employees are over the age of 70, working as caregivers, drivers, and cooks. She has also harnessed local resources, utilizing some 3000 volunteers per year — a strategy that strengthens ties with the neighborhood and reinforces the center's concept of community and inclusivity.

It's a testament to both Sugi's leadership and her program's success that some of the staff also include former day care alumni. They grew up and came back to work here, "like salmon coming back to the river," she says. "The fact that they choose to enter the welfare business is so rewarding for me."

At 42, Yuichi Sugi is one of those salmon, returning to his childhood home after 14 years in America. He navigates the four stories of winding hallways at Kotoen with ease, stopping to point out the different living quarters and features on each floor. Like his mom, he knows all the ins and outs of the sprawling complex. The building is worn around the edges (some of the rooms are overdue for renovations), but it is a warm and lively place. On one floor, a dozen day care children arrive to play instruments with the dementia patients. On another floor, a group of seniors are fed a homemade meal of fish and rice from the

Sumiko Shimizu, 80, Kotoen resident for 5 years. "The kids are very cute. It's really fun for me. I help to change the little ones' diapers. We throw balls together. I didn't have my own children, so I'm probably not very good with them, but they still play with me."

Jinichi Yamasaki, 83, Kotoen resident for 8 years. "I think the kids here, they do learn an important lesson on how to be a member of society. Even after they graduate, if I see them on the street, they always come up and see how I'm doing. You can tell a difference between the kids that went here and other kids."

OPPOSITE PAGE

The Kotoen facilities, where residents live. Double and single rooms; machine-assisted bathing; rehabilitation and therapy equipment; mealtime, served by caregivers.

Kotoen kitchen. Children's artwork dots the walls — pictures with messages written in shaky children's handwriting that read, "We appreciate you," and "Please live a long time." Yuichi greets one older woman, who laughingly tells him about her denture woes (they keep falling out) and he chuckles with her, half in amusement, half in sympathy.

Yuichi may be more surprised than anyone that he ended up back in Edogawa to eventually take over the family business, but no one is better poised to continue the legacy. Having Keiko Sugi for a mother was a unique education on becoming a better person. "She didn't say, you have to do this, you have to do that," he says, describing her parenting style and influence on him. "Just seeing her was enough."

He grew up walking these hallways, talking to the residents and children, and living the values that his mother passed down to him. "Respect their potential. Respect them as human beings, even if they're young or old. Everybody's the same to me. That's what being here taught me." ◆

Keiko Sugi with the youngest day care class.

"Respect their potential. Respect them as human beings, even if they're young or old. Everybody's the same to me. That's what being here taught me."

Yuichi Sugi, 42, who will eventually take over the family caregiving business.

OPPOSITE PAGE

Activities in the Kotoen facility that encourage interaction between seniors and children. Naptime in the main hall; lunchtime, with help from senior volunteers; playing games outdoors in the courtyard.

AARP International engages global stakeholders to spark solutions that strengthen communities, protect the vulnerable and enable people around the world to pursue their goals and dreams. Working with governments, civil society and the private sector, we are focused on enhancing the quality of life for people as they age. We serve as the global voice for AARP, a social change organization with a membership of more than 37 million.

THE JOURNAL ONLINE
aarpinternational.org/journal

AARP INTERNATIONAL ONLINE
aarpinternational.org

FACEBOOK
facebook.com/aarpintl

TWITTER
@aarpintl

CONTACT
AARP International
601 E Street, NW
Washington, DC 20049
United States
T +1 202 434 2398
E international@aarp.org

AARP International: *The Journal* is a publication of AARP. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent policies of AARP and should not be construed as endorsements. The mention of a product or service herein is solely for information to our readers and may not be used for any commercial purpose. AARP, which was established in 1958, is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization with tens of millions of members ages 50 and older. State offices are located in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands.

January 2018